

Teaching English in difficult circumstances: a new research agenda

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Introduction

It is now fifty years since Michael West coined the phrase ‘teaching in difficult circumstances’, referring to the importance of considering classes which consist of

over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches [...], ill-graded, with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English very well [...], working in a hot climate. (West 1960: 1)

Most English teaching in the world continues to take place in such contexts, which could thereby be termed ‘mainstream’ despite being largely ignored in mainstream ELT discourse. Indeed, teacher training manuals published in the UK after 1960 (particularly, after around 1978) shifted in focus away from large-class teaching at secondary level and towards small-class language school teaching. Similarly, UK-based ELT research continues to focus on relatively well-resourced settings (Rixon and Smith 2010). The current situation, it would seem, is a dysfunctional one – mainstream methodological discourse and research dominate but systematically fail to be oriented towards mainstream ELT worldwide.

Past research

In the area of large class studies, Shamim (2010) has provided a useful review of past research. Within the Lancaster-Leeds Language Learning in Large Classes Research Project (whose twelve reports were all issued in 1989), there was a concerted attempt to investigate some of the issues raised by teaching in difficult circumstances (henceforth, ‘TiDC’); however, this effort was not systematically built upon. The project team defined terms, compiled bibliographies and distributed and analysed questionnaires. In line with this research approach, the findings mainly concerned perceptions of class size and associated problems, but did not really explore possible solutions from teachers’ perspectives. Concrete,

bottom-up proposals for appropriate TiDC methodology are still rare, and scholarship and research still clearly needed.

A new research agenda

Building on the work of the Lancaster-Leeds project, and taking up where it left off, there are current needs for *scholarship* in the field of TiDC, including updating bibliographies and making existing resources more widely available. As Shamim (2010) indicates, a network has been set up to facilitate such scholarship and sharing of resources and ideas. Termed the ‘Teaching English in Large Classes’ (TELC) network, its website is at:

<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/telc>.

Original *research* into TiDC (including large class teaching) also needs to be revived, and with this in mind I offer the suggestions below. Starting from, but also departing from previous research, the following are avenues that seem particularly worth exploring:

1) Leaving behind conceptions of small-class teaching as norm and TiDC as a ‘problem’, we can start with descriptions of practice, in particular ‘good practice’ as perceived by participants, allowing ‘positives’ of TiDC to emerge as well as negatives. Ideally, learners’ as well as teachers’ perceptions will be accessed.

2) With a new focus on issues of practical concern to teachers themselves, not just ‘academic’ or policy-oriented issues, there is a need to move beyond discussions of ‘how large a large class is’ and possible effects of class size on achievement, towards a positive focus on developing appropriate methodology ‘from the bottom up’, for example through practitioner research.

3) A qualitative, exploratory ‘case study’ type of approach might need to be adopted in place of generalization across culturally diverse contexts. At the same time, research needs to be better disseminated and discussed across contexts (for example, through devolved ICT-enabled networking);

4) Explicit account needs to be taken of problems of *doing research* in difficult circumstances, and teacher education experiences in the field can also be usefully disseminated and analysed.

Conclusion

Research of the above kind has already begun to be engaged in by participants in the TELC network. For example, two of my PhD students, Mais Ajjan and Harry Kuchah, have been

eliciting teachers' and students' views of 'good TiDC practice' in Syria and Cameroon, respectively. Network committee members in countries ranging from China to Ethiopia have agreed to engage a number of teachers in providing narratives of successful cases of TiDC.

Anyone involved with TiDC and interested in joining in with our current and intended work is encouraged to make contact. We are intending to build gradually, aware that there will be no simple solutions to the challenges posed by teaching and researching in difficult and still, fifty years on from West (1960), under-investigated circumstances.

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References

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